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ABSTRACT

This document presents the findings of research concerning female friendship as literature portrays it. Literal sisterhood is not the focus of the report, nor is cross gender friendship. The examination rejects the suggestion that homosexuality is at the root of same sex friendship. The document touches on the enmities that may arise between female friends. It becomes clear that the treatment of women friends in literature evolves over time, from the works of Jane Austen and Sarah Orne Jewett to Joyce Carol Oates and Toni Morrison. Many works, even some psychological studies and leading novels, purport to address the issues of friendship among women. Betrayal is a common theme in literature dealing with women friends; the concept of competition among women, even among those who are friends, does not seem sufficient to explain it. The theme invites further research. A reading list includes 13 primary and 14 secondary sources and nine other articles and books. (SG)

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Female Friendship in Literature: Bonding and Betrayal

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LIBBY BAY

NEH 1993 Summer Study Grant Report: Female Friendship in Literature: Bonding and Betrayal

I had done some work previously on friendship in literature, but had no historical perspective. I began my study of bonding and betrayal in literature about female friendship, therefore, with Lillian Faderman's SURPASSING THE LOVE OF MEN: LOVE BETWEEN WOMEN FROM THE RENAISSANCE TO THE PRESENT, a seminal work for any study of female friendship. In addition to gaining an historical grasp on the relationships between and among women, I quickly discovered that there is no easy way to sort out the interlocking elements of these portrayals and their social import. Betrayal and bonding are simply two aspects. Faderman's conclusion, that many of the earlier friendships were inherently, if not demonstrably, sexual and that genital sex is the ultmate bonding, is not an approach that I had researched. On this question of homosexuality, Louis Auchincloss disagrees vehemently with Lilian Faderman. Although he acknowledges that Freudians see an aspect of homosexuality at the root of same gender friendships, he insists that, to the degree that conscious or unconscious sexual attraction between bodies is minimized, "the friendship will be deeper and truer." In the modern works I examined in previous research (such as Lillian Hellman's JULIA or Joyce Carol Oates' SOLSTICE or Toni Morrison's SULA) sexual attraction and/or genital love always peered through the pages as a possibility, but I focused on other aspects of the women's connections. After my reading this summer, I certainly must rethink its possibility as the ultimate bonding between women.

In addition, previously, I did no exploration of literal sisterhood as the starting point for sisterhood's larger meaning. Upon reading Nina Auerbach's COMMUNITIES OF WOMEN: AN IDEA IN FICTION, however, I found myself drawn to novels like LITTLE WOMEN by Louisa May Alcott and PRIDE AND PREJUDICE by Jane Austen. Perhaps, the sisterhood we get in E.M. Broner's WEAVE OF WOMEN does have its antecedent in the March household. And, perhaps, an emotion akin to sibling rivalry is the root of Cordelia's antagonism towards Elaine in Margaret Atwood's CAT'S EYE. Certainly, the interactions between the Bennet sisters are not sugar and spice.

In Faderman's book there are also references to real life friendships that illuminate the questions I had been referencing. I had previously paid little attention to them, but over the summer began to consider such relationships more. The classic real life friendship that Faderman considers the pinnacle of female bonding is between Sarah Ponsonby and Eleanor Butler, related fictionally by Doris Grumbach in THE LADIES and by Elizabeth Mavor factually in

THE LADIES OF LLANGOLLEN. A world of discovery is yet to be made about the relationships between Sarah Orne Jewett (whose short stories about friendship I added to my bibliography) and Annie Fields, Willa Cather and Edith Lewis, Fanny Burney and Mrs. Thrale not just in terms of their fictional works, but also in their private lives. I avoided cross gender friendships, both in life and in literature, even though they certainly provide a rich area of speculation. Shirley Marchalonis' anthology, PATRONS AND PROTEGES: GENDER, FRIENDSHIP AND WRITING IN 19TH CENTURY AMERICA focused on these kinds of friendship, but the betrayals and patronizing attitudes that characterized some of them are not really relevant to those I have been examining.

Since one of my major satisfactions as a result of this study was the development of an historical perspective, I spent a period of time on Jane Austen and found it very rewarding. LOVE AND FRIENDSHIP, a work included in her JUVENALIA, is certainly not one of her most accomplished, but it is interesting in that love dies in the novella whereas friendship between Laura and Sophia persists through all adversities. EMMA deserved and received more time from me than the work of a fifteen-year old Jane, and it became a foil for my study of modern fiction. The three significant friendships in the novel--Emma and Miss Taylor (Mrs. Weston), Emma and Harriet, and Emma and Jane--uncover three different kinds of relationships that can be traced in later novels. Janet Todd, in WOMEN'S FRIENDSHIPS IN LITERATURE, classifies these as social friendships though I would add them to Ms. Todd's division of manipulative friendships as well, and, in some sense, mentoring relationships, even if ineptly attempted. Emma's friendship with Harriet, for example, through which she is trying to guide Harriet into the right society, illustrates those self deceiving bouts of friendship that inequality between a pair can effect and the dangers that extreme admiration from one and absolute patronization from the other can cause. "You have been no friend to Harriet," Mr. Knightly, as adoring he is of Emma, tells her. And in the friendship of Emma and Jane that never was but should have been, we see examples of genteel betrayal in the snide accusations of one woman (Emma) about the other (Jane), which become much more obvious and sometimes vicious in modern novels. Nothing as shocking as Sula's seduction of Nel's husband, nothing as violent as Sheila's torture of Monica in SOLSTICE, but still, in her quiet manner, Jane Austen insinuates all kinds of possibilities in female friendships that are not elements of bonding and sisterhood. I have placed rereadings of NORTHANGER ABBEY and MANSFIELD PARK on my follow-up reading list as a result of the usefulness of Ms. Austen's projections to my study of twentieth century fiction by women about women. In JANE AND PRUDENCE by Barbara Pym lie direct links in style, texture and feeling to Ms.Austen's prose and substance, with only subtle indications of critical feelings one woman experiences

towards the other. In Joyce Carol Oates, in Toni Morrison, in Margaret Atwood, in Mary McCarthy, the betrayals grow cruel and coarse--we leave, for example, an almost dead Monica and a resentful Sheila "in an ambulance speeding along the country roads" at the end of Oates' SOLSTICE, and find a saddened Nel recognizing only at Sula's death that it was Sula and not Jude she had been grieving for all those years, and we watch Elaine, in Atwood's CAT'S EYE, spending her adult years reconciling the terrors of Cordelia's treatment of her in childhood with the pity she now feels, and we wonder by the end of McCarthy's THE GROUP just how loyal these friends were to one another. The jealousy, the resentment, the social pressures that inevitably make women rivals in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are not too different in kind from the more intense and aggressive responses (not to mention graphic descriptions) of contemporary works.

Most of the psychological texts listed in my bibliography were not too useful. Books like Helen Gouldner's SPEAKING OF FRIENDSHIP dealt with such particular case studies that they were not relevant to literature. Eva Margolies' THE BEST OF FRIENDS, THE WORST OF ENEMIES, though not as centered on analyses of individual relationships, was rather obvious and superficial. Some of the recent novels, of which I expected much, were disappointing. Terry McMillan's highly touted WAITING TO EXHALE, for example, was a particular disappointment. It did emphasize female friendship, but it was little more than popular trash. I did, on the other hand, add several texts to my bibliography as a result of an Institute I attended in early June on "Reconstructing the American Canon," and from conversations with colleagues; some of these works were especially useful.

I have not yet found a final answer to the question of betrayal in fiction about female friendships though the summer grant certainly gave me ample opportunity to plumb the depths of bonding. Particularly in modern and contemporary American fiction, the betrayals grow fierce and the explanations I can posit--the "sexual plea" that one psychiatrist, Charlotte Wolff, hears in all heterosexual women, the ways in which society makes women see themselves as "unacceptable" (Elizabeth Janeway) and inculcates self shame, the continued acceptance of the Swiftian idea that he never "knew a tolerable woman to be fond of her own sex," or Bruyere's assertion that "in love women exceed the generosity of men, but in friendship we [men] have infinitely the advantage," the advancements of women that put them in competition even with their friends--do not yet seem sufficient. I have, however, opened new doors of inquiry and look forward to future research.

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